Narrator: Robbie Phillips
Interviewer: Tara Hinton
Date: July 11, 2023
Location: Harkers Island, NC
Project: Down East Change

TH: [01:12] Well, I have started recording and I'm just kind of checking right now for volume. Okay, because this is a little finicky. So, I'm gonna put on these headphones. I'm still listening. It just, I can hear exactly what it's recording through that. That's what's gonna be going on. And I usually like to tell people, I don't speak a lot during the interview, like between questions, just because it's your story, and I want to make sure that your story is heard. And, you know, me intruding the background with little noises. So all right, so perfect. So we're recording now. It is July 11, 2023, and this is Tara Hinton with Robbie Phillips, and we are at the Core Sound Museum. I'm recording for the Down East Change and Recovery Project.

RP: Gotcha.

TH: All right. Great. So I just want to start out by asking you to just tell me a little bit about yourself. What you do now for your occupation? How old are you? And then we'll go into some of the other questions.

RP: [02:13] So, so I'm a Reverend. So it's Reverend Robbie Phillips.

TH: Reverend Robbie Phillips—I apologize.

RP: Yes, yes, yes. I am a pastor in the PCUSA. At the time of Florence, I was serving a church at Wildwood Presbyterian, which was in Newport, and I'm now serving the church in Beaufort Grace Presbyterian Church in Beaufort.

TH: Okay, wonderful.

RP: So and I also help my husband, so we live Down East. We live in Bettie.

TH: [02:41] And when were you born and where did you grow up?

RP: [02:44] Okay. I was born in 1961, June 12, 1961. And I was born in High Point, North Carolina. And, but didn't grow up there. We moved. My family moved around a lot. So I've lived in Kentucky. I've lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, and then my family moved back to High Point—my dad's job took him back there. We also lived in Currituck County. I graduated in high school from Currituck County. So yeah, so moved around a lot and how I got here is I met my husband at East Carolina, and his family had just moved here. And so yeah, we got married in 1983.

TH: So you went to East Carolina.

RP: I did go to East Carolina.

TH: Great, wonderful. What did you get your degree in?

RP: So my first degree was in Business Management—in business and then management as a concentration. Then I went into—heard the call—into ministry as a second career, I'm a second career pastor. Let's see, that was in 2000. It took me seven years. So 2001, really, I think, I started exploring in 2000. And then it took me seven years because I did some of it online and then my last two years, the MDiv, I had to go and be on campus. So, I graduated from the first degree in 2008 and the second degree in 2010.

TH: [04:26] Okay, wonderful. Yeah, and just going back really quickly to like your family and your parents, do you have siblings?

RP: [04:32] I do. I do. I have two sisters, one older and one younger.

TH: Okay, great. So you're the middle child.

RP: I am the middle child [laughs].

TH: Me too, a privilege, right? [laughter]

TH: And your parents—what exactly did they do?

RP: [04:45] My parents? My mother was a school teacher, and my dad worked in the paint and finishing furniture business and so that was yeah, that's why he kind of moved around a lot.

TH: [05:01] That must have been a bit hard to kind of move from place to place and adjust to that.

RP: Yeah, I did yeah it was, but you learned how to do it, we're resilient. So I have friends—I still have friends, some my best friends, and we've reconnected interestingly enough through Facebook. That was able to reconnect with some of those friends in Pennsylvania where I went to grade school, so, and some friends. Tabby Nance—actually went to middle school with Tabby Nance, and when we lived in Jamestown, so and then we met up here. She's here and I'm in Carteret County.

TH: And how did you—what called you out here?

RP: So we were married in 1983, and my husband had graduated, I still had not graduated. So, he had graduated from college, ECU, and found a job. So, it was in a tough job market at that time. I don't remember right now exactly what was going on, but the economy wasn't wonderful. So he went ahead and took the job and fell in love with it. He was working as a surveyor, and in Beaufort, and he now is his own licensed surveyor, land surveyor, and has his own business, which I help him run that.

TH: So you moved from Beaufort to Bettie?

RP: We did. Let's see, our first child came, I was pregnant with her, and she was born in ‘86. So we moved in ‘85, to Bettie, bought some property—bought five acres—and moved a mobile home in 1985. Move down. Okay.

TH: [06:51] Great. So you've been here for a little bit—

RPL Yeah, I mean, we just celebrated our 40th? So almost 40 years have we lived here? Not from here. I'm from off. [laughter] I'm from off, but it's—not really anymore. Not really. Oh, by the way, we've raised both of our children here, and we just love this area. Absolutely love it.

TH: Yeah, that's amazing. Can you tell me a little bit about the community in Bettie and how that's been, coming from the outside?

RP: [07:23] Yeah. So it's never really been, I mean, people have always had a lot of respect for my husband because he was a land surveyor. So, I guess I kind of piggybacked up on that. And, you know, I was just really busy with the family. We built the farm pretty quickly after that. My daughter was, I think she was a couple years old, when we built the horse farm and, and I was teaching and training all around and helping my husband in the business. I mean, I just got really busy, and then once my son—they both graduated from East Carteret—once my son got off to school, that's when I went back to school. I initially went back thinking that I was going to be a teacher. I was at ECU again. And I took a couple classes, and I just all I just felt like, I was like, “This is not what God's calling me to. You know, much as I thought that it was, it isn't.” And at the same time, I was working at the Boys and Girls Club in Beaufort. I ended up being in a leadership role there. I was the unit director there, and I can't remember the years but I was unit director when I started back to seminary—so 1998-99, 2000ish. Yeah, I was the unit director, and then left that position to take my first church position, which was a regional coordinator for a large—for the PCUSA, a large regional area. So, yeah, kind of a leadership role in that as well.

TH: That's so much to do all that.

RP: It was. [laughter] It was it was fun, though. I enjoyed it.

TH: Yeah, that's great. So the large regional area with PCU, do you know—does that go across the counties?

RP: [09:31] So, let's see. The Presbytery of Coastal Carolina, we're at the fringe of it. And so, it stops. There's one of our churches is in Havelock—so in Craven County, but that's the furthest it goes. Then it goes all the way to the South Carolina line. And then it goes to [pause] West End, I think is the furthest, which is just on the other side of Southern Pines. So it's a pretty large geographical area, and I was the Regional Coordinator for the northeast part of that which was basically not Wilmington, but close to Wilmington and then up.

TH: Great. You must have learned a lot working—

RP: I did. I learned about a lot about the area I learned. Yeah, I did. I learned a whole lot doing that. So, I did that for three years. It was—that was a temporary position. And, and that's when I just said, "Okay, I'm gonna go for the MDiv." And I had to go full-time to do that two years, and so I left that position. And then, you know, as soon as I graduated, I was in a church within less than a year serving at Wildwood, so.

TH: So yeah, you have a great connection with the community, it sounds like.

RP: Yes. Yes. I have. Yes. Yeah. I mean, my kids grew up here. And my son, both of my kids were active in sports. My son played a lot of baseball, and both of my kids decided to stay here, which I'm pretty, we're pretty proud of that. So they both went off to college, and they both came back, and they're making their careers here. They both have families now. So they're both married and have children.

TH: Yeah, and what are they doing exactly?

RP: My son is a teacher. He is a teacher. He's the PE teacher at Atlantic Elementary. And then he comes to Smyrna and does the middle school class, and then he coaches. My daughter is a—she's working for her paralegal degree now, really close to finishing that, but she works for a law firm in Morehead City.

TH: Good for them, that's amazing.

RP: Yeah. Yeah.

TH: So I think a lot of people say that Down East is a very special place.

RP: It is very special. Yeah, it is. It's a wonderful place. It's a wonderful place to raise kids.
TH: Yeah, and I'm just curious, what makes it so—so wonderful?

RP: [12:07] Yeah, you know, and I try to think about that sometimes. You know, definitely being close to the water, being close to nature. That, you know, that will ground you, but the people are the ones that make it. We do this together and we do life together. And so, you know, like Karen and some of the other ones that—and Pam—that have grown up here. You know, they have different roots, but I just love them. I mean, I just they're so down to Earth. They, just to me, they just get life. I mean, I've lived in other places. I mean, while I was in seminary, it was Richmond, Virginia, for heaven's sake. I mean, I could—I didn't have air conditioning, so I'd have to raise my window up at night. And I could literally hear gunshots. I mean, couldn't have been too far away—kind of scary. So it's just different to live here. It's a slower pace. I think that we all love that part of it. That is just a slower it's a slower pace. It's changing. Oh, it's changing [laughs].

TH: What makes it—or can you remember when exactly did you realize that Down East is just sort of different?

RP: [13:39] Oh, wow. Well, we chose to move down here. My husband probably knew more about it because he surveyed all around in the community. I mean, he was the one and he drove me when we first started deciding that we were going to be married and this would be the area we would live, he would bring me down here and

drive me around. So we would drive around, and it was just beautiful. Being in Currituck—I graduated in Currituck County, and so, when you drive on those causeways and I'm like, "This just feels like home. It feels like this is where I belong." And just the water, and the marsh, and the beauty of everything that's here.

TH: That actually transitions perfectly into what I was going to ask [laughter]. I was going say what do you enjoy most about the natural environment here? [laughter]

RP: Yeah, and that's it. Yeah, my husband loves to fish. I do. I like to fish when we're catching fish [laughs]. My husband will fish no matter what. So we don't have a whole lot of time to do that now. But yes, we, you know, our kids grew up with in boating and being able to go to the Banks and just enjoying all of that and the waterskiing, and just being in the salt air and being in the saltwater. I mean, it just—I don't know. It's just wonderful. It's wonderful.

TH: [15:10] Yeah. Are there any special fishing spots?

RP: You know what, and I probably couldn't even tell you where they are 'cause I'm directionally challenged, but anywhere from—because we would put off in Beaufort some, we would come to Harkers Island and put off and go over to Cape. Definitely going to the Cape. The Cape is a wonderful place to go and fish—and anywhere in between [laughter]. It's your dream, and wherever you want to go. So a lot of around Shackleford Banks, and you know, a lot of that area.

TH: Gotcha. Do you all have a boat?

RP: We do.

TH: That makes things easier.

RP: It does. I think you can't live around here and not have a boat [laughter].

TH: [16:00] Well, thinking back to since you've lived here in the '80s, have you noticed any changes?

RP: Oh, my goodness.

TH: Especially to those marshes or those favorite fishing spots.

RP: Yeah, so my husband, you know, being in the construction business, the construction end of it, he's kind of like at the front end of development and, and all of that. So yes, we've seen a lot of changes. There's been, especially in Beaufort, been a lot of changes. And a ton of changes are happening right now in Down East, Carteret County—people from off buying property. My husband and I just look at each other every time a survey job comes in, and we look at job, and we just kind of are like, "Oh my goodness, somebody's going to build a house there?" You know, it's just like, they're building houses in places that even 15 years ago wasn't possible. So I'm not really sure exactly what happened. But that's been a shift and a change. And, you know, definitely,

putting the big—I mean, they're putting their houses up on stilts so they'll be out of the floodwaters. So yeah, there's a lot of that going on. And not really, I don't really pay attention that much to the beach, Atlantic Beach, and all of that area, although he works over there plenty of times. Just the most of the changes: housing developments, and then everything that needs to be built around that. So, not just your housing developments, but, you got to have job opportunities, you got to—all of the things that come around that. So as these older people, more wealthy people move in here, you gotta have a whole job market, you gotta have that workforce that's going to support that. So I see some good things happening, and I see some not so good things happening. So and I, I always look at my husband, it's like, who's in charge of making these decisions? I don't know what's going on here. Anyway, and he's super busy. I mean, it just is just left and right. And he tries really hard to help the Down East people do what they want to be able to be able to. If like, they want to divide their property or whatever, so they can make a little bit of money, he tries to help them. But yeah, it's, it's growing in leaps and bounds around here.

TH: [18:45] Yeah, and when people are like—who is buying from Down East?

RP: Sure, that's a really good thing. So, I mean, I think that it's probably far, more far north than Raleigh. I think, a lot of times we kind of shrug it off and say, "Well, it's people from Raleigh coming down here." I think that it's different than that. I really do. I mean, if you go around, and you look at the license plate, and there's people from New York, from New Jersey, from Ohio, from up north moving here. Yeah. I think some magazine articles went out. I literally I think that that's what happened. I think and then it was just like, "This is a gold mine." This is a pearl right here, and people are like, "Oh, yeah, we want a part of that."

TH: Yeah, absolutely. It's happening in the mountains too.

RP: Yes. Yeah. It's a gorgeous place. Yeah, it's a gorgeous place.

TH: Why do you think people Down East are willing to sell?

RP: [19:50] Well, we've seen a lot of that since Hurricane Florence, and people are just tired that they're flooding and dealing with the recovery—and they're finding that their property is far more valuable just to wipe the house out and let somebody else build. There's not enough to keep people here, they can't make enough money here. You got to make your money off and then come back. So to be able to stay here, you know, the property values are just going up, up and up and up—anything that's close, even remotely close to the water or to the marsh. It's just, it's phenomenal how much they're selling it for. So they're able to take that money and then that's their little golden egg that they can retire on or whatever. I don't know if they're moving, moving away, but they're definitely moving away from Down East, Carteret County. A lot of people are just like, "I'm done with this, dealing with the it." There's nothing—and the younger people, there's nothing here for them. They can't make a living here. You know, my kids are figuring it out. But I mean, you know, there's, there's just nothing here.

TH: Yeah, yeah, I was gonna ask where you thought people were going? If the young people are moving out or selling, where do you resettle?

TH: Yeah, and that's interesting. And it's—I don't know that I really have that answer, but my guess would be that a lot of them, they go to a school off. And so they're settling in wherever they go to college. They're finding—I mean, I know several people in my son's age group that that's what they did. They went to school up in Raleigh or in the Piedmont area, and they're settling up there. I mean, I'm thinking maybe someday they'll come back, and but it'll be to retire. That's what Carteret County is becoming, it's a retirement community [laughs].

TH: For you staying here and your children staying here, what does that mean—all these people coming in, and a lot of people selling?

RP: [22:12] A lot of change. I'm the kind of person that kind of deals with change easily. My husband not so much. But people are having a hard time because the culture is changing, and the culture is really what is here and is what people are buying into. They don't realize what it is. I mean, they may be buying the waterfront, yeah, but when they get here, they fall in love with the culture and the slower pace and how things are, you know, down-to-earth. So slowly, as all those people come, they change the culture, they change—they change who we are, and that's probably the most painful part. To see and watch that happen. I mean, what a wonderful thing here for the Decoy Museum to be here to kind of establish that culture and ground it here. I hope to see more of that. And I know, there's a lot of talk about that around the fisheries and the all of that, just kind of grounding the area in what it was. And that hopefully, as people will come here, they're like, "Yeah, I'm really about it." So they'll value that, and do that. But no matter what, when people from off come, they change the culture—just by that. I mean, just driving around—we live in Betty, I go to Beaufort at least once a day, if not twice a day, and back—and just driving is different. They drive different, they drive different up North [laughs]. You know, and they're not as patient as we are. I just want to kind of tell them, like no, just slow down. It's okay. It's okay. Everything's gonna be alright. But yeah.

TH: That's one thing I noticed too. Driving up here how slow everything was.

RP: It just slows down.

TH: People don't go the speed limit always, and that's okay.

RP: Yeah, and it's just okay. But yeah, the more and more—I remember, as the kids were growing up how hard it was to even get out on the highway. We live off—about a mile off—of a highway, but just to get out. I mean, it just increasingly gets harder and harder and harder to pull out in the morning. You know, the traffic, there's a lot of traffic. And that's increasing, that's not changing. So and I'm sure that that's all playing in the environment, you know. I mean all of that, the pollution that comes from just having more people here [laughs].

TH: And the development, especially, where are you noticing that the most? Where do you think that's creating the most traffic?

RP: [25:18] So Beaufort probably is the big huge hot spot right now in Carteret County. The growth that's happening there is in Beaufort, and I think that that's been a pretty intentional move. There's been, I know, being part of the Eastern Carteret collaboration, there's been connecting and partnering with people in Beaufort and building those bridges, and just kind of watching all of that, but I think there's been some intentional moves made to kind of, to bring that along. You know, I can't say that we're anti-development, because we're not—my husband's in the business, okay. But we definitely are into responsible development and doing it appropriately and doing it the way it needs to be done to salvage and save the environment the best we can.

I mean, we have our own little farm, we have our own little what we call a slice of heaven, if you want to. We have 32 acres, and we were lucky enough to inherit that. My father-in-law was the one that bought, and then right beside, we had the five acres, and then he bought the rest of the farm, and now it's ours. We get contacted at least once a week, literally at least once a week by mail, and now somehow they've gotten a hold of my phone. And they text me, people saying that they want to buy our property. And we're like, "No." So we're gonna hang on, we're hanging on. And I mean, our property borders Weyerhaeuser property so we literally have 1000s of acres behind us that are undeveloped. I mean, my kids are asking now, because they both live—my daughter lives on the farm, my son lives right down the road. And, you know, they're asking, them. I think it's just a matter of time, and I think that they will have to make—they will be the ones that will have to make the decision as to whether they will sell part of our farm. Because they can't, right now, can't get to the back to the Weyerhaeuser property. You can't get back there without widening the right-of-way. They would have to buy our property to do that, and we're just not interested in doing any of that. We'll see what happens.

But I think my kids will probably be the ones that will be making that decision someday, to do that, and yeah, kind of sad. Sad to think about all of that being—you know, they grew up right there. Sad to see all of that maybe go away. But it doesn't take long, they can go into other areas where I grew up. In Currituck County's, the same exact things happening. You can go down to Wilmington, you can go down even to Jacksonville, Wrightsville Beach. You don't have to go very far to see what's going to happen here if someone's not done. This is what's gonna happen.

TH: Yeah. And thinking about that kind of future—you said that makes you sad, right?

RP: Oh, yeah.

TH: What decision would you hope that your kids and then the next generation would make to protect?

RP: [28:52] So we've told them, it's just the kind of parents we are, it'll be the decision that they make. But, you know, we've always told them that we hope that they keep the farm intact and, but we understand sometimes the pressures to do whatever. And, financially, it's there to help support them. And if, you know, if they need to sell it off, you know, do it responsibly and do it the way it needs to be done. I mean, it's a nice piece of land. It's pretty high in places and pretty low in places. So, as is the rest of the county. Right now there's no county-wide sewer, so they have to get septic tanks, they would have to be able to just do it responsibly, because that's what we see in Down East, Carteret County. I don't think that people realize if you start cutting up things and half acre lots, you got to put a septic tank on every one of those half acre lots. Well, let's why don't we just start thinking

about doing things a little more responsibly, having larger tracts, you know, and so you're not putting septic tanks in there. So I don't know, I don't have a crystal ball. I don't have a crystal ball. But I can tell you we know enough. My family knows enough about big development—that once they get here, it's done. So right now the people need to be making the decisions, the county commissioners need to be making decisions about zoning, and what do we want to allow in this area. And do it responsibly. You know, don't make irresponsible decisions. And I mean, you know, Hurricane Florence opened my eyes to irresponsible decisions that have been made in the past. You know, North River is a fine example. Fine example. There should not be any houses in North River. No, nobody should have—nobody should live in North River. Definitely. Our workforce doesn't need to live there. The poor people don't need to live there. Nobody needs to be living here, and there's a whole community living there.

TH: Yeah, yeah. Can you say more about that?

RP: Ah, I can say a lot [laughter]. I'm sure I could go on and on and on. But yeah, some of the homes that Carteret Long Term Recovery Alliance worked with those families in raising some of the homes there, and getting them above flood zone. You know, and now I know, you've got land back in probably the 50s, and the 60s, when those homes were built for those families, the flood zones then were five and six feet. These homes, some of them, were built below even that. I don't know if the homes had settled, if they were put at the right flood zone or what. But since then, the flood zones now are 9 and 11 feet. So you've gone from 5 and 6 feet to 9 and 11 feet, and you've got a whole community there that the homes are at 5 feet—or even a couple of them that we worked with were actually a little below that. Florence did a number in that area. Some of our survivors had, you know, 5, 6, 9 inches of water, you know, came into their first floor. What do you do? What do you do? [laughs]

You know, I mean, we're still dealing with it, trust me. I still have one survivor family that I carry them close, close to my heart that—'cause they did everything right. They did everything right. They had flood insurance, they had all of it. They had everything insurance, and they had, that was one of the families that had 9 inches in it. Believe it or not, that family, almost five years later, is still not back in that house. Yeah, don't get me started. Don't get me started. So we were able with some of the insurance money, we were able to get the home elevated. And because they were fully insured, no other organization that we worked for—like Samaritan's Purse and some of the big ones that came in here with big money—we weren't able to help this family with those monies because they had insurance. The insurance company was supposed to help with that. So yes, so it went into litigation, we had to hire a public adjuster, we've had to hire an attorney. And we're just now settling with the insurance company. The flood insurance company settled pretty quickly. The wind and hail company was the one that didn't want to settle. So, you know, the interesting thing with Florence—so that family had floodwaters came up, but also the roof failed. And so, they had a lot of damage. I'm a businessperson, okay? You know, I get it. They look at that situation, and they say, "Just move away." But I'm a pastor, and I have a pastor's heart. And now I see more clearly—and this family has probably taught me more than anything about that—the system that is set in place for these poor people. That is the only thing that family has. The only thing that they have, that they've built their wealth, what little it was, they built their wealth surrounded around that home. To just walk away from it was not the answer. Just walking with them through that journey, I mean it was an intact family; they had two special needs daughters, and they're autistic and their adult autistic girls now. In this five

year period of time they lost their father. I'm sure the stress from all of this probably didn't help his health, and they're living in Beaufort now. And yeah, I think that we are going to be able to recover some of that wealth for them, some of that wealth at some point, and be able to get them into a safe place.

So that's been my mantra, is like: don't put your workforce in unsafe place. Don't do it. It's not it's not good for you, it's not good for them, and it's not good for the community and long run, it's going to not be good. And so, I think that that is something that the town of Beaufort is struggling with. I'd like to think that our county commissioners are struggling with that, I'd like to think that they are—I'm not sure they are, I think that they have their eyes on other things. But you've got to put people in safe places. You know, don't put them in a place that is not safe. North River is not safe. So the answer has been, over the years—and all you have to do is drive through that community, the answer has been through the years is just to raise the homes. I don't disagree with that. I think that some, like I say, just move away. I mean, the buyout programs and all those that come in right after the hurricanes come in, then, "We'll buy this out," and turn it into whatever. What that does to those families' lives, I think that it's not a good thing. So they've built this community, they have this community there—and it's a really good community. I mean, the North River people are wonderful people and they look after each other. But they live in homes that are not safe. Period. They're not safe, they're not in a safe place. And I don't know why are they even doing that anywhere? I always look at people like, "Why?" My husband tell us like, you know, king tide you're gonna have water underneath your house, and they're like, "Okay, well we won't put anything down there." They don't live here. They live off. They don't really care. You know, the people live here all the time, you can handle the king tide. You can have water coming into your garage at high tide, you can't. I mean, that's where you put your stuff. So anyway, I could go on and on and on.

TH: Well that's great and I have more questions now. [laughter]

RP: Well, that's good. [laughter]

TH: North River now, how often would you say they're flooding, or sunny day flooding even?

RP: [38:34] So, you get a good Noreaster, it just depends on the track of the storm. In all of Down East Carteret County, and we learned a lot, and I think everybody learned a lot, but I know I learned a lot and my husband learned a lot. He's kind of in that business you know, he does flood certificates and everything. It depends on the track of the storm—not the intensity of the storm, but the track of the storm and where the winds will come in and where it pushes in. So, but definitely in just a northeast storm, if it tracks just the right way, North River will—they will flood. They all have. I'm thinking, foot of water, the ground level there, in most places, the ground level is around three feet. Most people build their houses two feet up to three feet up above the ground, you know, that's normal. And so you think about that: water just coming under their septic tanks, water's flooding the septic tanks. We saw a lot of that—septic tanks, we've had to replace septic tanks. When we went in there and did, the Carteret Long Term Recovery Alliance was, you know, safe, sanitary and secure. If you go in there, you commit to helping this family get their homes back to a place that is safe, sanitary and secure. It's definitely happened that we just said, "We think you need to relocate." And we've helped them do that. Sometimes that's the answer, and sometimes it's not. So, anyway.

TH: [40:25] Yeah, and how do you determine if that's, you know, the option that you have to go with?

RP: I think that it's all about how badly the house was damaged. The trying to figure out how much money to put into a home versus the value of that. Certainly didn't do that alone. You know, that's done with a lot of people looking at a situation and thinking through that, and what would be the best for the family .You know, developers, I mean, definitely contractors helping us try to figure that out. But mostly, it's around—I mean, small, small answer, okay: Like a house is valued at $100,000. Okay. And it's, you know, 50%, damaged, then you just have, okay, and then construction prices now are, like, way higher than they were even five years ago. What does it gonna cost to put this house back to a livable condition? And then, what's its value at that point? There were definitely some situations that it was just, you just kind of shook your head and just said, "You know, I'm really sorry. I mean, this is just not a project that we can do anything with." And, I mean, when those were the projects that—what was it called? Fix fixed, fixed, NC, not fixed NC. But anyway, some of the state level, some of the state level programs that came in to help with those bigger things, like replacing mobile homes, replacing homes, and making them—raising homes getting homes up, if that was all viable. If the structure of the home couldn't handle to be raised, then that was another reason. Like, you know, if you got to redo the whole entire floor system, and all of that. You just look at a system and figure it out. That's what we did.

TH: Yeah, so how many of those homes would have had flood insurance do you think?

RP: [42:57] Lord, I wish I could give you a number on that. I can't, I don't think I would even want to go on record giving the number on that. So, the goal of CLTRA was to help those who were in the lower economic. I mean, we definitely were here for the whole entire county, but the people who we are here for still today, five years later helping, are the people of the lower economic spectrum, the elderly, families with disabled people, children or adults and them. Those families, yeah, they're still just a lot of them. And I don't know, if the state program is gonna, I don't know if that's gonna get—I don't know. I mean, five years later, and they still, I don't think that—I think we've had one mobile home replaced with that program. I mean, we were able to do it with Samaritan's Purse, did some amazing work here. And then we had another organization that we partnered with that came in with some big Red Cross money. And we were able to help some of those really hard projects where you looked and you're like, "I don't know how we're gonna do this." Then we would make the decision to just destroy the home and, and put another one there. I mean, we've done several of those, I would say that we've done a good 20 to 25 of those out of over almost 700 people that are on our list.

You know, a lot of people were able to recover, and I say this all the time: most of the people in this county recovered within a year. Most of the people did and that's the reason everybody's like, "What are you talking about? Hurricane Florence recovery? Come on." No, we're still in recovery. They told us when we started CLTRA, that it was going to be seven years. And I believe them now. I didn't then. I was like, "No, no." Yes, it takes that long, even for families who have insurance, even families who have insurance. It's still—they're still in recovery. And the people that don't have insurance—some people just make the decision not to have it—but flood insurance to a home that is below flood zone is out of this world, how much that cost for somebody. I mean, you can't, you can't have—most people can't afford it, and so they just don't get insurance. So we're here for those people. Those are the ones that we had built the system, you know, the list that we have, we built the system to prioritize and raise up those; the lower income, the more difficult the project, the higher up you are on the list.

So if you were elderly, or you had disabled people in your home, that just raised you up in the list. Just systematically just worked on those from the top down. And, and some of the people, they were able to recover on their own, and that's wonderful. But knowing that there's a lot that still haven't recovered their lives back. They're living a different normal now.

TH: [46:48] Of course. When you say recover, I'm just thinking, like, what is your vision for them? What does recovery look like in Down East and for your organization?

RP: [47:00] So I think in the perfect world, in the perfect world, the federal money, my tax dollars—I pay dearly, by the way—my tax dollars would help those disadvantaged families first. And the money, I mean, you hear all this wonderful stuff coming down from Raleigh and—I mean, not Raleigh, but Washington. I remember when all of that was happening, I was like, "Yay, yay, yay." I'm not cheering for them anymore. I'm not, I'm literally not cheering for them anymore. Because that money does not get to the people who need it. You know, and a lot of people ask, "Where does that all go?" Well, a lot of people in those programs that have been started up, there's a lot of employees being paid. So there's a lot of administrative costs going along and going out the door. It's just a system, it's a system that's in place that is not right. So the money, the way it trickles down, and the way it gets to the community to actually help the people who need it the most. By the time it gets to them, it's like $5,000. And I just shake my head, like, that's not good enough.

I applaud organizations like Samaritan's Purse, and, you know, some of the some of the other ones that have come in here and helped us because they get. They get it, so they—I mean, unfortunately, they can't help everybody, but they come in here and they say, "Give us your hardest ones, and let us go to work on them." That's exactly what they did. So, a lot of them were able to help some of the those really hard projects that we weren't seeing a way forward for the family, just to help them relocate. We were kind of there and they literally wiped the mobile home out and put a new one up. And definitely got it up. And—and I mean and this is the other part of CLTRA—is to help them understand, you've got to maintain this home, you've got to keep your roof up, you've got to replace it every so often blah, blah, blah, help them understand that. Then the next phase of all of that is just kind of following through with those people 10-15 years from now when they really do probably need to have their roof replaced. I mean, I just think that in the big vision that that's what that is—that there's people that are watching over that, that system and taking care of that expensive home,100-$150,000 home that they're putting down for this family—that they live in, that they maintain that home, that they're able to keep it up. Yeah, and then when I say do it responsibly, don't fix a home that's going to be below a flood zone. Go ahead and try to figure out how you're gonna raise that. You know, I mean, that's, to me that's responsible, that's being responsible. New development for heaven's sake. You know, don't. My husband's like, "Don't. Nothing in this county needs to be built lower than eight foot above sea level." I mean, that's minimum, nothing. But in the community of Davis, they had nine foot of water come in. So, I mean, that was kind of a snapshot kind of place. But I mean, that happened, but nothing in this county should be built below. That's responsible. And we tried to do that. It's expensive. Very expensive, by the way, to help people do that.

TH: I'm sure, I'm sure—and to prepare for the next one.

RP: [51:12] Yeah. Yeah. That well, and that we all get really antsy. I mean, right after Florence, on the heels of Florence, the year after was Dorian, which the majority of the county did quite well during Dorian. The eastern part of the county, not so much. Cedar Island got kind of wiped out. We were down there helping them pretty quickly after with some of that, and then of course, Ocracoke got really slammed. But that, I mean, a lot of anxiety. When the storm season hits, it's like, "Are we ready? Are we ready?" So I know that first year, second year really, it was all about roofs for us. So we lifted up roofs. No matter what situation it was in, if your roof needed to repair then we wanted you on our list, we wanted to be able to help you. And we know there are some people out there and there's some roofs out there that haven't been done. Not nearly as many as there were five years ago, though. [laughs] I don't, but I don't belittle any of that; there are roofs on our list that haven't been done yet. So, and either there's not the funds to do it—maybe an expensive repair or replacement—or not having volunteers here or qualified volunteers here that can climb up and do roofs. That's an issue.

TH: Yeah, absolutely. I was going to ask how, how you get contractors in?

RP: [52:56] Well, we build a lot of partnerships, and probably the big thing is the money. And we knew the money was coming in to the state level. There were grants, you know, given to us, and United Way was phenomenal in being able to help us get those grants. I mean, there's probably been, I don't know what the bottom line is because I'm not in the leadership and CLTRA anymore. Last I heard, it was really close to a million dollars that we have funneled through our organization that have gotten right to the people. Finding contractors that are good and capable was a huge issue. Then, as new storms came on and other parts of the country, a lot of those, the people were gone. It's just basic. Then there's not enough of them to handle the new construction and then be able to do the repair construction. It's been hard to find the contractors that are willing to do that. There's not a lot of money in it, not a lot of profit in it. So they have to have the right heart—those contractors have to have the right heart to help us to get it done. Then, of course, the beauty of CLTRA is doing things with volunteers. I mean, that's the beauty of it, and then making sure you get good qualified volunteers and having people that kind of manage those and watch in. I always tell people like, "You don't want me on a construction site. Okay, first of all, I'm gonna be the first person that falls. I'm gonna be the first person that gets hurt. I'm not the person to be on that, but I will help you get people in." But you know, CLTRA has the people that manage the construction sites and get the work done. We've done, in partnership with the governor's office, in partnership with AmeriCorps and Baptist Men, and all kinds of organizations, those are just to name a few. But all kinds of organizations come to us, and we're able to get them and find projects for them to work on. So yeah, a little bit, a little bit, chisel it away. I think the best—and that was one of the questions that you asked me—in the best world, we would have enough money to fund and funnel to good, qualified contractors, not the fly-by-nighters that come in right after the storm, but that would supply and we would have the money to be able to do these repairs with contractors. And then do some of the small stuff with volunteers. Volunteers are great, and they have the best hearts and some of the projects, this is exactly what needs to be done. But then some of these projects just need way more, you know, just way more. You can't lift a home with a bunch of volunteers. You just can't. There's too much too much liability involved. [laughter]

TH: [56:31] Yeah, and in the five years, almost five years since Florence, how have your interactions with state and local government, and federal government changed?

RP: Yes, and I think it's still changing. I think that—and that's why one of the things that the Eastern Carteret collaboration is part of it, and which CLTRA is part of, because I'm part of it, but and some other people are getting involved in it. That's one of the things that we're working on, is building those partnerships, helping the community, like Davis, to help the community like Cedar Island and Atlantic be able to help each other do things corporately. And they do, but just kind of building these partnerships locally, building the partnerships in the county, outside of the county. the county commissioners, we definitely have a really good working relationship with Carteret Emergency Services. I mean, and all of those partnerships have developed since Hurricane Florence, and they're getting stronger. We've had some wonderful support with the North Carolina emergency management. At the state level, I don't think CLTRA wouldn't have stood up and been as strong as we were without their support. And without the NC VOAD, which is the North Carolina Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster—so that's the big volunteer, it's a nationwide thing, but then there's the North Carolina—they've been instrumental in helping us get started and in guiding us and guiding the direction. Then the governor's office, the Office of Recovery and Resiliency were phenomenal early on in helping us and getting established and building the partnerships that we needed. And then, I can't not bring in Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, because they helped and our presbytery helped pay to send me down to Texas that was ongoing recovery down there to see how recovery looks and how it happens. And I networked and made a lot of connections down there that we were able to get some of those organizations here. And yeah.

So nation, I mean, national volunteer organizations. It's a huge network. Could it be better? Absolutely. Absolutely. There's entirely too much money that gets stopped in Raleigh and doesn't make it down to the people. Too much money. And the people in in Raleigh who choose to see, they get it. They see—they see the system that's broken and breaking down. And the beauty of recovery is with local people helping the local people, even if that's local contractors, but us, the people helping people. To have Raleigh come in here or even Raleigh, I mean, the programs that have started up and failed, where they've been just complete failures since then, just complete, because they can't manage it at the local level. They can't. But if that money, somehow they would figure out how to get that money, we can manage it. We can do it. The local people can do it, and we can do it responsibly. You know, when that's what everybody's all, you know, government working with nonprofits that's like, "Oh, you know, the nonprofits are going to give it away, and the government "—no. We need to learn to work together. You know, we just need to trust each other and learn to work together. And I think that that's one of the things that the ECC's (Eastern Carteret Collaborative) going to work on. That is really slow process, really slow process. Those kinds of changes don't happen very quickly. So, but I think the younger generation, you got us training you guys what we've learned. I mean, that's been one of my mantras, just getting the word out there and just saying, "Guys, this is a system that needs—it's really broken, it needs to be fixed." So I know, it's not just here in Carteret County, it's gotta be nationwide issues, everywhere, there is tons of money that's being wasted, wasted. And the people who need it are still suffering. And it's wrong. I want my tax dollars to help them. You know, that's what I want. That's what I want. That would be the perfect situation.

TH: [1:01:57] Yeah. And when you say the money is being wasted, can you give me an example?

RP: Yeah, and in programs that just had been failure, so and I wish I could remember the names of these programs and I can't right now, I'm sorry. So a lot of it is administrative cost, and where the state with a couple

of other programs have worked to hire their own contractors, their own case managers—I mean, there's been systems coming in here trying to do the case management. And that is, that's vetting the survivors. So it's looking at the survivors and making sure they're not default on a loan, that they've paid their taxes, that they—all of those things, that all those things have to be in place to help these people. So if any of that stuff is not in place, which CLTRA has worked—we help them try to get compliant. We have used some of our money, we have gone after money to help people pay their taxes, so we can get these in there. But in all of that, there's just administrative. There's people that are being paid. And it can be done so much more efficiently, so much more efficiently if they would get the money here, instead of the state trying to manage—somebody in Raleigh trying to manage—a contractor here in Carteret County and what they do. You can't oversee that. We're the ones that can oversee that.

I can't tell you how many—and I wish I could think of the program, but I can't—but it was really early on. And we were all really excited. You know, the state was sending contractors down here, and they were fly-by-night contractors. I can't tell you how many projects that we had to go in there and redo what they fixed, because it was done inappropriate, not right. And decisions. I said early on: who makes these decisions? The decision making is based on some ideology out there that I don't get any more. I don't get it. How you're really going to help somebody in that and how—who can really hold them accountable? You can't do that in Raleigh. It has to be done here locally. We're the ones that can do that. Because we're their neighbors. You know, we're their neighbors. We can do it. So I don't necessarily have an answer to the problem. Well, I have some answers. I think if I was given the authority, I could probably fix some of it. But I know the problem though, and I think that that's probably where my heart is now, where I'm not doing a whole lot of case management anymore with CLTRA. But my heart is turning towards trying to—because I mean, they do listen to us—trying to fix these things and trying to get the money where it will be used most appropriately to help the people. So we'll see. Just chisel away, just chisel away.

TH: That's a really beautiful vision for the future, I think.

RP: Yeah, well, that's what keeps me alive. Not a chart, that's for sure. And justice, justice for people, for the little guys because they get stomped on. So it's definitely my heart. And I can see so much more now than I could. Early on, and it was Presbyterian disaster assistance that gave me this analogy and said, "A hurricane is basically like ripping the roof off of your community, and then giving you the opportunity to stare down at your community and what's going on and what's really happening." So it helped me see that. It helped me see that, and a lot of the injustices that are 50, 60 years decisions that were made 50, 60 years ago, and how they're playing out now. We can do better, we can do better. I hope your generation can do it.

TH: [1:06:51] Yeah, we're trying, right.

RP: We can do better. We can make different decisions, but it takes a lot to change and shift systems like that. Especially when it's deep-rooted, that, you know, in this whole, our whole, you know, that which has just bee—Again, you know, the opportunity—COVID gave us the opportunity to kind of see the injustice and unfairness, you know what I'm saying? I mean, the whole country was involved in that. And you can now see, and that's the reason the racial stuff just exploded during that, is because it was a huge issue. And that's why it exploded. And

it gives us an opportunity to try to make those changes in those systems. To make it more fair for people who have, you know, they don't have a voice, you know, they don't have a voice. We have to be—people have to have to be kind enough to listen to them and try to understand and empathize with their situation the best you can, and then try to change the system that will help them—not you. Help them. And that's a better America. To me, that's a better America. So, to me, you look at a community and how the elderly are taken care of and how the poor are taken care of determine what kind of community you are going to be. To me. It's not about serving the wealthy. It's not. It's not. It's about taking care of those people who are going to be taking care of those wealthy people. So yeah, everybody wants to be on the top of the mountain, but not everybody can be. See, most of us are down here and let's just take care of each other [laughs].

TH: [1:08:54] Yeah. So I'd like to backpedal a little bit, if you're okay with that.

RP: Yes.

TH: Just to Florence actually and when it happened. Okay?

RP: Okay.

TH: Were you here during that time?

RP: Yes.

TH: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with that?

RP: [1:09:09] Yeah so even five years later, but we stayed in it—it was definitely my heart throbbing and what I realized. So yeah, we stayed right here. We didn't leave when it was marching towards us a category 5. It was really scaring us, scaring the daylights out of us, as a matter of fact, and we were trying to figure out how to get the horses out. You know, we have horses, we have dogs, cats—we were trying to figure out how to get us all out evacuated. We were grateful when it started downgrading and—because we felt like we could manage a cat 2. And we did. We did have some flooding at the farm. We've had more flooding than we've ever had. We did have some water in our foaling stall, which I had a colt and her mother staying in, and we had about three inches went in there for about 12 hours and then came back out. So went out with the tide. So not too bad, it was a little scary, but not too bad. Probably the big thing for us our house. We have a house that's built up, you know, it's a foot above flood zone. The biggest thing is that we had spent, about a year or two before, the money to get our roof replaced. If we had not, we would be living in a different scenario. So we had—I had that experience. We had a lot of trees down, we had a lot of fences down, you know, that was all stuff that we could—our family just band together and we could get it fixed. And it took us a couple weeks. and we did. We pretty much got the farm back up together. The church I was serving, not so good. So I got the call within—well I called them because I wasn't able to get to the church to see it because it was in Newport—but I got the call to say that the roof had failed in the sanctuary. Didn't really tell me, they just said that there was water in the sanctuary. But once we all got there and looked at it, it basically had destroyed the sanctuary. So I mean, that's what drove me to do everything that I've done ever since is: if the church had had the money to replace that

roof, you know, a year or two before that storm hit, they wouldn't have lost that sanctuary. Because that was the only thing that happened—no flood water there. And the church's probably—I don't remember—it was old. It's a historic building. It's a beautiful, beautiful little church in Wildwood. But with the roof failing, then that's what.

So that experience, you know, was what started the eye-opening experience for me, and then having the Presbyterian disaster assistance, which comes in and supports the pastors first and the church leaders first and meeting with them and then laying out for us what a long-term recovery group. Because I said, you know, "The Methodists are already here. The Baptists are already here, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, we want Presbyterian disaster assistance here. What is it going to take for you to be here, arm-in-arm, and let's get this done." And that's when they laid out for us these long-term recovery groups. I mean, I remember walking away from that meeting and looking at some of my colleagues and just said, who have been here for a long time, and just said, "Why don't we have one of these here already?" And we shrugged, and it didn't take but one or two days and we started the phone calls, and we partnered with Habitat for Humanity and the leadership there, Tammy Blizzard, who was a friend of mine, and we got things rolling. So and got it started. And like I said, without North Carolina emergency management, FEMA actually was here, they were very supportive, very helpful in explaining, and we met with them. Those were some really good things that were happening. I think some of those larger organizations, North Carolina emergency management, they were there. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance was there, North Carolina, VOAD was there and got everybody in the room. And that's when we stood up.

The community was there, there was probably about 50 or 60 people there that day, you know, from the community and from those organizations I just mentioned, and, and helped us stand them up. And we were standing them up all up and down the coast. So and we partnered with them along the way, we were meeting with them, sharing experiences, sharing resources, trying to, you know, "You can go here, you can get money here." I mean, there's a lot of that going on. NC VOAD was pretty instrumental in helping us do that. North Carolina Emergency Management was phenomenal and helping us to do that and helping us manage that. The governor's office was phenomenal at that level in helping us to do that and in helping us network and find those. And I got to see with that next year because CLTRA was stood up in—Florence happened in September, we stood it up in October—six weeks later, and when Dorian hit we got to see. I did, and our organization got to see how all of this works on the front end of these storms. And I was, I would just remember being so super impressed, just super impressed and supported and I felt good. And it helped me. It made me feel good, not just about our community, but it made me feel good about our country, you know that these things, but it just needs to get bigger. You know, it just needs to get bigger. And the state and the federal government needs to trust the local people to be able to get the work done. Because that's where we're at now. They feel like they can do it all and they can't. They're horrible at it. They're horrible at it. We're the ones that are getting the work done. [laughs]

TH: [1:15:57] It sounds like an incredible network of churches.

RP: I mean, it's everything. It's not just churches, but it's everything. Yeah. And to be able to get the work done, and it's neighbors helping neighbors. And it's beautiful when like the North Carolina emergency management,

and even the governor's office, when they're working closely with those local organizations to get the work done. It's, to me, it's beautiful. That's the way it's supposed to be that then everybody got—I don't know what happens. Like, no, I think we can do this better. I think, and I don't know the system good enough to know that. I don't, I don't. That's why I say—what I did I say early on? Who's making these decisions? I still say it. Who's making these decisions? I just don't know. But I want to get in front of them.

RP: And what would you say, if you got in front of them? [laughter]

TH: I would say a lot of what I've said now. It's like, no, this is not how it's supposed to work. Why are you paying all these people, and these people that need the money are getting $5,000? Why? You're spending millions for this person to get $5,000? That's just dumb. It's dumb. No. And, you know, I mean, yeah, you got to pay people that, you know, there's no doubt, there's no doubt you have to pay people. I mean, CLTRA got a whole lot more done when there was a paid person ram rodding everything, okay? I mean, you know, and we could have gotten even more done if there had been more money to come in and help that. But I mean, there's just, there's a breakdown somewhere. And I think it's a lack of trust, you know, the federal money has the guidelines. The people have to, they have to be—they gotta pay their taxes. There's certain things that have got to be in order. And they got to be held accountable, the money can't come in and they can't use it for something else. Which happens, you know, that's been a failure in the years. They give, "Okay, well, I'll give you $25,000 for you to repair your roof," and they use it for something else. And that's happened over the years. That's wrong. It shouldn't be that way. That's not how we, you know, and so there's just that lack of trust that there's local people that can make sure that that doesn't happen anymore. You know. There's a lot of places in the insurance, which is another whole system that's really broken, by the way, that the lack of the trust. They've built a lot of regulations in into the system. So the insurance money comes in, and the people have to use it for certain things, and they have to show that they've used it for X, Y, and Z. Otherwise, they're gonna have to pay it back.

So like I said, it's complex, it's hard. I don't have all the answers. But I saw some beautiful things happening when local people were working with state-level people, not federal. FEMA is just another whole thing out there. I mean, just another whole thing. Okay. I mean, they were helpful, okay, they get it, they get it at a much bigger level than what we ever did for sure. We needed their expertise. But there's just—I don't know. I wish I could fix it. But I don't think there's one governor in the world that can fix it. I don't think there's one president in the world can fix it. I think it's the people. And the power—and the power is in the local people, the local people being able to do it and holding each other accountable and holding each other up and taking care of each other. You know, making sure that the least of these are the ones that get the most help. The people over there at the banks don't need our help. Trust me when I say that. They recovered in six months. Because all the contractors flooded over there, that's where the money, that's was where the insurance money was flooding in. They got it.

TH: That difference in recovery time is just, wow.

RP: [1:20:42] I mean, that's probably, you know, you lift that roof off, and you stare at all of that. I mean, I saw that even at the church level. The churches, the larger churches that had more resources, blah, blah, blah, blah, were the ones that were getting their sanctuaries back up, and they're getting. Wildwood was still out there and

we were still meeting in another, you know, the fellowship hall. So, even at that level, I mean, like I said, I just saw how unfair it was and where everybody put their energy. And that was the reason I saw—these long term recovery groups, they specifically, you know, are about helping the least of these the people that are going to have a really hard time. Even the case managers now and our construction people, I just tell them, I was like, "No, if they could have recovered, if they could have made those repairs. It's been five years, they would have made those repairs." Okay, no, people, people don't purposefully live like that. Most people don't. Some people may, most people don't purposefully live with a roof that still leaking five years later, most people will find a way to fix it if they have the resources. We need to get to the people like that and help them. That's what I want my tax dollars to go to. How 'bout you?

TH: Yes [laughs].

RP: I don't mind paying my fair share in any of that, if that's what it's gonna go to help. I get really bent out of shape when it's going and getting wasted the way it's being wasted. Oh, that was loud. Yeah, sorry. I get to talk.

TH: No, please don't apologize. I'm here to listen and learn. [laughter]

RP: Yeah, yeah, well, and I could teach. I hope that, part of CLTRA, I hope we get enough time in between storms, where we can spend some time doing that, and teaching people, and bringing in the younger generation. I mean, we had some good young people in our organization. But, you know, as all those kinds of organizations do, the people pretty much who are there now are the retired people. All of us that had to work for a living had to go back to work. And so we do it at a volunteer level. There's not so many hours in a day that you can work, family, volunteer, you know, there's just not so much, but so much you can do. And so, yeah, those who have retired are the ones that are still really with the organization and getting it done for the most part. And yeah, and I help, but I think that, yeah, but the beauty—that's the that's the thing about these long-term recovery groups, is they're here for the long- term. And the vision for CLTRA was for it to be here until—I mean, and that's our mantra—until the last home is repaired.

So we have a list. There's still a good list of about 150 people, somewhere in the neighborhood, that are for us to fix. We have referred people to other organizations like NC—what's the big one? Oh, my gosh, I'm sorry, I can't remember that. But they've been referred to these larger organizations that have got the money that still aren't. So I don't know who, but I want to say that there's probably a good 200 or 300 people not recovered, that are still on somebody's list out there for some kind of repairs. And they're probably pretty big projects. The ones that got sent to the state level organization that was supposed to have all these bunches of money, they were going to replace mobile homes, they were going to put in modular homes. All kinds of stuff. They had the money to do some big projects. It's not, the money still not gotten here yet. I don't know where it is. Again, who's making these decisions? Who is? Yeah, I need to know. 'Cause I want to get in front of you. You know, people can blame it on Cooper, but I don't think it's him. I honestly, I don't. I don't think it's him. Who's making these decisions? I don't know.

TH: [1:25:41] Yeah. Well, I want to go back to your role as a church leader. You know, I imagine it was a really tough time for everyone.

RP: Yeah, it was a really tough time for all of us. Yeah, it was hard. It was traumatic. I mean, that's one of the things that's been identified in our community: that we are a trauma- impacted community. I see it now. I'd never really seen—it's one of the reasons why the opioid epidemic and all of that it's just skyrocketed here—it all can be stemmed back to trauma and generational trauma. I experienced that at that at one level, but then, you know, I'm way more aware now of the people who have been here, and they've grown up here, and their parents grew up here. That generational trauma and how they deal with it. It's here, and the people here—if you can, if you're trained, you can see it, you can—you can understand it—and I see it at a much bigger level. So I experienced the trauma, but that opened my eyes to the trauma that really is here. And then and then trying to go to work to try to help that. You know what I'm saying, to help relieve that? We partnered with Trillium, the mental health organization. They were huge partners in us and getting boots on the ground going and visiting people door to door, I mean, literally—stuff that we could have never done. But they were, you know, trained people going door to door trying to help those people and uncover those people who were probably having anxiety, trauma, whatever manifests itself from that trauma in those situations. And they did. I mean, you know, we all bumped into them before, before it was over with. We all bumped into people who were just overwhelmed, overwhelmed. And suicide. I mean, it was, you know, it was rampant there for a while, and suicide by drugs. I mean, people overdosing, purposely. I don't know that anybody can connect it directly to Florence, but definitely the generational trauma, and then, you know, trauma again, Dorian, and then COVID. All of that just kind of manifested itself into a really kind of bad hornet's nest here.

As church leader, my first frontline was to help Wildwood find the resources to—they were insured, but it wasn't enough, by the way, they were underinsured—to replace that. So we were able to, you know, I was able to help them find the partners that they needed, and they were eventually able to repair and replace, not replace—but repair the sanctuary. Now I'm in a position of building ministries that will help the community build resiliency, and that's what we're doing. You know, like Caregivers Ministry is one of the things that we're doing at Grace Presbyterian, just helping people network and so nobody in the community is isolated. You know, that's kind of a vision. It's like, help us find the isolated people and then we'll figure out how we can help them connect to what the resources that they need. And so, you know, I feel like as a, as a church leader, that's kind of where I'm at, it's just helping to build a stronger community. To me, when you make the poor and the least of these stronger, then your community is stronger, because the rich don't need to necessarily be—they're fine. You know, mentally and emotionally they can have as many issues—by the way, they can. But for the most part, they're going to be able to recover and move on with their lives. And the other ones just kind of sit there, and they have to learn to live with a new normal. Yeah. Maybe that's what we're all doing right now, I don't know. Learning to live with a new normal. Yeah, but Florence definitely put in place—and again, I don't know who made these decisions—but Florence definitely put in the place for doors to be opened up. But why? I mean, you think about it, we got slammed during Florence. Why would somebody want to come and build a house here? I ask you that. I live here. I know why I want to live here. I love it too. And I'm assuming that that's reason they want to live here. But what—I mean, we got slammed by Florence. Why would you want to come and build your house in Davis? They had six foot of water there. That's like over our head, okay. I mean, why would you want to build a house there? I don't know. I don't get it. But I do get why I live here and why I wouldn't move, and I feel like my house is safe. Maybe it's not. If we had six foot of water, my house would be okay. It would be under my house. Yeah so. My horses would be sloshing around to their knees. [laughter]

TH: Right [laughs].

RP: Yeah, so. Anyway.

TH: Do you think most people felt that sense of safety after Florence? Or was that just completely destroyed?

RP: [1:32:14] Oh, that was completely wiped out. Oh, yeah. No, and it comes back every year. I can tell you, it comes back. It gets—it does get easier. I do believe there are some people on the outside looking in and helping. I mean, like I said, I think that this grant, it was pretty huge to develop the collaboration at this local level. That was pretty huge for people to even have the vision to look at a community and say, "That's what they need." So there's five of these grants that were given out all across the state, and it's really kind of cool how it's working. But it's developing collaborations with the local people out, you know, it's not the out coming in. It's the local people. Our favorite mantra is "with and through," we want to do things with people and through people—not to and for them. So we're kind of changing, changing how that looks. I think that that will change eventually, like I say, it's real slow, that kind of change happens really slow. So I think that slowly, that help—and there were a lot of resources poured into this community after, which brought help, there were a ton of resources. And not all of it was wasted. There were a lot of human resources, there was a lot of financial resources. So much of that is done "to and for"—like FEMA's a big deal and the government—that's what, they do it "to and for" you. That's not how to build a stronger community. You do it "with and through" the community, the people, that's where the power is, that's with us right here, not them out there. We need you. We need you. We do it together. So and build trust, figure that out.

I think we have a lot of work to do in this community. Because I think that there's even a breakdown even just with our local government and with the local community, you know, it's a lot of money. "Let me do this for you"—we gotta change the mindset. You do things with people and that's how you build a stronger community. So I'm all about that from pastoral leadership, which was what you were asking me about, and just in helping that organization get off the ground and guiding and directing it, you know, being one of the ones that help do that. I just see that as my ministry here: to build a stronger Down East community. So and—we're stronger when we're collaborating, there's no doubt. Whether you're collaborating with your neighbor, or you're collaborating with the community right across the creek from you, or you're collaborating with Beaufort, or you're collaborating with the county commissioners, or whoever it is, if you're collaborating, that's how we can do it. And we do it together. Probably –sorry—probably one of my biggest things is being humble enough to say, "I don't have all the answers. But I'm pretty sure that the answer, and the power is here. When we do it together, we figure it out." That's where the power is. And I think that that's my voice. You know, that's what I can carry into the church and out of the church, that we can do that. And so yeah, so I hope we see change in the good way in this community, but the landscape of this community is changing. So I don't know what another storm would look like. Recovery from another storm would look very different right now than it did even five years ago.

TH: Yeah, absolutely.

RP: [1:36:40] Yeah, there's different people living here. Yeah. I don't know if it's good or bad. It's just sad when people have to leave. That's all. I'm just glad it's not my kids. But I know a lot of other people, you know, their families, their kids grow up and leave because they can't do it here.

TH: I love that though, that the power is with the people.

RP: Yep, power's with the people it is. Yep. Take it with you. Pass it on [laughter].

TH: I will.

RP: It's in my theology. [laughter]

TH: Well, speaking of pass it along, actually, I was looking before this interview at the flyer that the Carteret Long Term Recovery Alliance did on preparedness.

RP: Oh, okay. Yeah

TH: I'm wondering, I was just wondering how you all disseminate that?

RP: [1:37:38] I am not, like I said, I am not in that part of the organization right now. But they do. You know, one of the visions for that organization was to partner with the local emergency management, which they do and had the hurricane preparedness right along right around the first of—was it June? Yeah, the first of hurricane season. And they did it in May, I think. So that's one of the ways that they do that. They have a pretty good Facebook presence. And throughout the five years, there's been some really good trying to get things out into the social media early on. You know, Cheryl Burke was right in our hip pocket all the time, she did a lot of really good stories for us. And so that got the message out and got. And we went—I did and now Kay Coole, who is the who is the chairperson—does a lot of going to events, like Rotary and the civic organizations doing presentations. That's another way they get the information out. Yeah, probably still learning about how do you get that out. I still say that that's kind of surface stuff and the power is in the people going to these people and helping them and just saying—especially the isolated, the elderly, who get really isolated. People with mental health issues isolate themselves. And they're the ones who are not going to be prepared. So, neighbor taking care of neighbor, CLTRA being that big neighbor that can go into those people and just say, "What can we do to help you be more prepared?" That's a better method. It's very time-consuming to do that. Flyers are great, but if they are not getting in the hands and then being utilized, they're only as good as the piece of paper that they're on.

TH: That's the future?

RP: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, Facebook is really good for that. They have a good presence on Facebook and Instagram. But the people that I'm talking about aren't on Facebook and Instagram. They're, I mean, literally, they're isolated. They're not just isolated from the community that they don't have internet, or they don't have a phone that they can have social media on, or, you know what I'm saying? I think our community, probably

most people have at least cable in their house, if not internet. There's more and more of that happening. But, you know, like, again, it's the power of the people. You know if your neighbor has internet, so if they don't have internet and they don't have social media, then you help them. That's how you're going to take care of those little people. I think that that's more the message that CLTRA should get out there more than anything. It's just, you know, take this flyer over to your neighbor, but spend a little bit of time with your neighbor. Find out what they need. Do they need some food? Do they need water? Definitely after a storm, do they need help getting out? I mean, even Carteret Emergency Services, when the pending stuff, which they do a phenomenal job on—but they're incapable of getting to those isolated people. They just, I mean, it just—they can't, because they don't know who they are. But your neighbor does. We know if our neighbor has an issue. We know if they don't have anybody taking care of them or watching out for them. You know if your next-door neighbor needs to evacuate and has the ability to evacuate. You know it. Just do something about it. Anyway, yeah, community taking care of the community, which I think Down East is really good at doing that. I think we're not as good at it as we used to be. I think probably getting less and less like that. Just as things change.

TH: Right, development and all that.

RP: Yeah, yeah. It's all related, but it's kind of amazing how this place has exploded developmentally-wise since Hurricane Florence. It's almost like Florence had an influence on it. It's almost like that. I don't know if that is, or if it was coming anyway. I have no idea. But it really has exploded in the past five years. And I mean, we felt it in our business. I know most people would say, "Yep." I mean it was coming, it was coming anyway. I guess. But yeah, it's just exploded kind crazy. If you're from Charlotte, why would you want to build a house that's been in an area that's been devastated by a hurricane? Why would you want to do that? [laughter] Do you want to be down here with our trouble or what? Come and join us [laughter].

TH: I guess they for money to have trouble.

RP: Yeah, yeah. Well, and clearly, it's the water. I mean, clearly, it's the coast. People want to live here or you want to have a second home here. You want to be able to come and get away from the fast pace and have a place to vacate and then probably rent it, rent it out. So it can be income for them. Yeah.

TH: [1:43:55] Well, thinking like 50, 50 years, 20 years in the future—what do you think Carteret County is going to look like?

RP: I think you can go down—and this is what I think right away—I think you can go down to Wilmington and get a good look. That what we're going to look like. And then Wilmington can take a really good look just south of them at Myrtle Beach. Because that's what Wilmington's becoming. They're still some really pretty secluded places in that area. I don't know what county it is down there. But there's still some good, some nice places down there on the beach, but you can see that that's what's kind of marching our way unless we do some big—and I know people don't want to hear it. They don't they don't want to regulate, but unless this area does some zoning, then anything goes. People can come in here and do what they want with their piece of property, all they gotta do is buy their piece of property, they do what they want to with it, and nobody will have a say. But if you've zone, at least there's some controlling on what can be built here. The county regulates some of that, but

not nearly what needs to happen to be able to control what happens down here for a lot of reasons. You know, saving the environment is one of them. Saving the community is another. Just kind of preserving what's here and the beauty that it is. There's, really good reasons why. That's why people would look at me and say, you know, "You're not, you're not a true, true, true conservative." But yeah, I mean, I think that just we've got to be responsible with what we've been given. It's not that hard. Who's making the decisions? Who's making the decisions? The power is with the people, but we're not making the decisions, it's people—other people that are doing it. [laughs]

TH: [1:46:36] Yeah. Do you think people Down East—what would have to happen for that resistance to zoning to change? What has to give?

RP: I think that helping them understand that it is the only way, at this point, to control and to be able to preserve what we have. In just the short history that I've lived here, you can see the change in the amount of people that are able to go out and fish and, and do—and the amount of fish that are out there, and the shellfish and, all of that stuff that has to be regulated now because there's not enough, and the pollution and all of this stuff that's getting overwhelmed. But it's such a huge system, you know, and I think we just kind of throw stuff at it, throw stuff, we throw money at it to try to fix it, and it's just kind of a band aid. To me, the zoning could help. The zoning could help control some of that.

TH: Sure.

RP: And help people see that it would help control. And that's what people don't want to be controlled, they want to be able to do what they want to do. But the problem is—and this is one thing that I get really good as a pastor—is we will not make the right decision. We will make the decision that benefits us and nobody else. That's our nature, that's human nature. So, you know, unless you have a vision, unless you have in the community that we're looking after one another, which is definitely part of my theology and definitely part of the church's mission is take care of your neighbor. Well, let's, let's talk about how to do that on a larger scale. So that's just one way to do that. You know, and our neighbor is literally all the fish and all the wildlife and everything that lives here. They're our neighbors, too. You know, I mean, got it, you got to take care of them, you got to take them, or you're gonna lose it. Just go down to Myrtle Beach or Wilmington, and you can see what it'll look like. Then and then educate yourself. So, because Wilmington exploded without zoning, and it's crazy down there. Have you ever driven down there?

TH: Yeah, just this past weekend.

RP: The road system in and around Wilmington is crazy to be able to get in there, and the reason it happened is because it exploded without a plan. And that's what's gonna happen here. There's not a plan. There's nobody. Nobody's watching that. I literally—I don't think so. It's not in anybody's radar. I would hope that we could learn from that and learn from Wilmington. And I don't know—Wilmington, I don't think is a lost cause. I think Myrtle Beach is a lost cause. But I don't think there's anything you can do to help it at this point, it's just huge. But that that's the kind of thing that will happen because people will come in here, and they'll buy their little piece of land, and they're gonna put that business here, they're gonna put that business here, that here, they're gonna

do whatever, and “Oh, wait a minute, we need a road.” You got to have a plan. And zoning helps with that plan. And get some leadership at the county level that knows how to do that and make plans like that. I just, I don't think anybody's looking at that. It’s not on our radar. We've had too much traum—it's the trauma, you know what I'm saying? We're reacting instead of planning and instead of, you know, we just live in a reactive, we're just reacting to whatever happens next. Like, “Oh, okay, there might be a storm this year.” We're reacting to that and not—so if we're not careful, it's exactly what'll happen.

TH: [1:51:16] I know, the county doesn't really have, like a specific stance on climate change, right?

RP: I don't think so. And I mean, that's County Commissioner level. I mean, it's just not—it's just, they function on a different ideology. I'm humble enough to say that I don't think I have all the answers, but I don't think you do either. But I think that we can do this together, and we'll come up with the right answer. Instead of, you know, and that's the climate of this whole entire country right now. It's like, it's just like bulls fighting. You know, it's crazy. So there's no, no working together; it's saying, “I know all the answers! I know all the answers! I got the answer!” No, you don't. Be humble enough to say that you don't have all the answers. You know, but believe in the power. Believe in the power that together we'll come up with the right answer. So yeah, so I don't know about—I don't have any influence on them. So I know that they’re some of the people that are making the decisions. I know they are. And they don't let us in on it. [laughs]

TH: [1:52:41] Curious, I don't know if this is, you know, in the realm of the church, but the church that you work with, do you all have a specific stance on climate change that you talk about? And again, I know this is—

RP: Yeah. PCUSA would, our denomination does. Not our local church, our local church is really struggling just to survive right now. So we're not going to make any kind of stand on any of that.

TH: Understood.

RP: But the local or I mean, the national church does. I mean, you can go on PCUSA website and find out. Probably all is to right there. But do I know? Not really. Not really. But they do—they make some pretty big stands on big social issues.

TH: Sure.

RP: Yeah, most churches do. Most denominations do, and some of them aren't too—but it is what it is.

TH: Right.

RP: What I do know about the PCUSA, and I love about it, is we are made up of a diverse group of people. And we believe in the power of the people working together. We believe it. We believe it can happen. That’s the only reason I’m still in the denomination [laughter].

TH: I’m sure it’s hard work.

RP: Yeah, it is. And it's and you don't see a lot of change, because it happens so slow. But there's some things that I get really excited about. The work of CLTRA is beautiful. I mean it's really exciting. The work of the Eastern Carteret Collaboration, to me, it's beautiful. It's exciting. But to see the real change that a lot of people know that needs to happen. It just happens so slow, because it's changing. It's changing the whole, you know, it's just changing ideologies. It's changing the way people see their world and see everything around them and see themselves in it. And that doesn't happen very quickly. At all. The church has a huge influence on that, by the way, for the people who come to church anyway. The church has huge influence on that—on how people think and see the world and see themselves in it. Yeah, definitely one of the reasons why I went in the ministry. Yeah.

TH: How are you feeling? Are you ready to wrap this up?

RP: Oh, I don't know. I could talk forever, but I'm fine. It is getting late. I have some grass to mow. [laughter]

TH: Wonderful [laughter]. Just one more question. And it's a little one that I missed.

RP: Okay.

TH: We—the Core Sound Museum—wants me to ask people about ghost forests. Are you familiar with the term ghost forest?

RP: Ghost—?

TH: Ghost forests.

RP: No, no.

TH: Okay, cool. Cool. Have you noticed these large stands of sort of snags, white dead trees on North River?

RP: Yes.

TH: Ok, so that's what we call ghost forests. Yeah.

RP: Okay, you guys got one out here!

TH: Oh, yeah, we do [laughter]. Are you familiar with what causes them? Or do you know what?

RP: [1:56:18] I can probably guess, but it would not—it would just be a guess. Yeah. But yeah, I mean, you know, the storms definitely don't help in that, and the flooding and probably just, you know, the environment. I mean, the pollution making it to the root system. Probably. That's what I'm thinking.

Th: Yeah, that's wonderful. Do you see them pop up? Like where are you seeing the pop up more since you've lived in Carteret?

RP: [1:56:48] I've seen a lot of that happening in Down East Carteret County, and it happened a lot right after Hurricane Florence. So all you have to do is take a drive down there and just take a look if you, you know. I know my husband pointed them out, so. And I know—I remember, in our own yard—because we have a lot of trees in our yard—it was not Florence, it was storms prior to that coming in. And they would get diseased, some of the trees would get diseased, and they would lose—lose the tops and then they would die. As a matter of fact, we've got one in our yard right now that needs to be taken down that's completely dead. I honestly don't know, you just assume that, you know, sometimes if you prune a plant and it gets really angry and it'll just die. I just kind of always assumed that that's what kind of what it—that the wind was just pruning and it just made it made it really mad. But there's probably a lot more going on than that. So, yeah, ghost—?

TH: Ghost forest.

RP: Ghost forest.

TH: Yeah, there's a lot of amazing research, especially at NC State. But really, the cause of them is, you know, salt spray, and then the water table rising and then you get saltwater intrusion.

RP: Gotcha.

TH: And all these ditches. Those trees can't survive that.

RP: They can't survive it. Interesting.

TH: Yeah. And I know, it's something that it's not commonly known.

RP: [1:58:29] Yeah, no. So you do see it. So yeah, that makes a lot of sense because you see it a lot close to the marsh. Yeah, a lot of it happening close to the marsh. So we have a lot of forest land behind it that's doing quite well, by the way.

TH: Wonderful, I was going to ask. [laughter]

RP: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yes, I think that it is, and they come in there and—but Weyerhaeuser is managing that. There's somebody watching that and managing that, and that whole is pretty high land. I mean, it's, it's actually probably pretty valuable land in the big scheme of things. All back behind us, but they manage it, they do a really good job of managing it. So they replant it, you know, they harvest and replant it. And so, I wonder if that has anything to do with it. Or just doesn't get flooded. We know that it's dealing with the same stuff that all the other areas close to the marsh. And all that area—the marshes like right, right there.

TH: Yeah. Wonderful. Do you have anything else that I didn't ask about that you want to tell me, or that people should know?

RP: I can't think of a thing. [laugher] I don't know. I just—I am a talker, so I can keep talking. And things would just be lifted up, but you've had some really good questions. So that's good. You've kept me going and thinking

TH: Thank you.

RP: Hitting all the—hitting all the hot topics.

TH: Hope that's a good thing, right.

RP: Yeah, well, and like I told you earlier, it's just like, "Just be honest, Robbie. You don't have to be mean. Just be honest." Like okay. So I hope that I've done that. I hope I've been honest but not mean, any picking one person out or any organization out, or any—you know what I'm saying? Because, you know, I think everybody really is trying to do the best that they can do. I just think they're going about it the wrong way. And most of it is because they just don't—we don't trust each other. We don't trust the government. The government doesn't trust us, which is sad. With the people for the people. [laughter]

TH: Well, do you have any other people that maybe I should talk to for this project? Now that you've heard some of the questions.

RP: So, I don't know if you have talked to Barbara Garrity Blake yet. Has her name come up yet?

TH: I'm actually staying in Gloucester right now.

RP: So you know her?

TH: Yes, but you know, we haven't interviewed her yet.

RP: Yeah. She is one of the staff people for the Eastern Carteret Collaboration. She definitely is an environmentalist and has a bent. She's lived here probably longer than I have—I don't know, probably about the same time maybe. And so she has a pretty good broad—she would be a good person. And I would say I don't know who in the community. You know, people like Kathryn Chadwick. And I mean, those—Karen Amspacher's, probably, you need to interview her. No, you know what I'm saying? I mean, there are people, there are people that have grown up here, and their families have grown up here and have a really good. But Barbara is, you know, she's from off just like me. She's not from here, but loves the community. I would try to get a good a good mix of people. Try to get some people that have grown up here and get a perspective, because they would have a different perspective than even Barbara and I would have.

TH: Sure.

RP: And probably a sense of pride and a sense of, you know, and a sense of loss of the community that they're losing. And in that, yeah, I mean, you hear about it, and they write about it on Facebook all the time. So Karen's really good about doing that. Kathryn is, too—Kathyrn Chadwick. And there's other out there, others out there, but I would think Karen could probably point you some good places, too.

TH: Anyone specifically with the Carteret Long Term Recovery Alliance, who maybe had mold issues specifically? I know that's a lot of people.

RP: Did you say mold?

TH: Mold, yeah.

RP: Wow. So most of the mold issue—well, I don't know. They're probably still there, because that just pops up living in this area. You're talking about maybe a survivor, or a specific survivor?

TH: Yeah, or family that might be able to talk about just what they've been through.

RP: Well, $100, I would put down that Mary Rochford would talk to you. She's one of their survivors, but I don't know. I'd have to talk to her and it would need to be very sensitive. I mean, anytime you would talk to any of those specific survivors. I mean, she's still recovering.

TH: Okay.